



# Impact for Postgraduates: In Search of the Holy Grail?

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As has already been highlighted in the introduction to this themed issue on ‘impact’ (see Rogers et al., this issue), the recent ‘impact agenda’ has been engaged with in a variety of critical ways through the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). As a doctoral student, the word ‘impact’ is a constant demand on everyday academic life, owing to the pressure to consider it in terms of funding, publishing and future career. In the following I offer a consideration of the ways early-career geographers understand and engage with the institutional demands upon their research, in order for them to compete with their more experienced counterparts in an environment that is expecting ever more.

My doctoral research focuses on the complex relationship between prison and society in the UK. Whilst clearly there are a number of broader and important issues surrounding the politics of prisons and prisoners as marginalised subjects in society, my focus in this short statement is on postgraduate research and the impact agenda<sup>2</sup>. For the initial proposals of my PhD research surrounding the role of work-based offender rehabilitation programmes, I felt like I had three major assets in my hands. Firstly, I could collaborate with the ever-increasing cluster of geographers working on spaces of detention that had come about since The World Trade Center attacks of September 11 2001, contributing to a new strand of the discipline.



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<sup>2</sup> I should however note that positive ‘impact’ for prisoners could (or should) be conceived as decarceration and that there is a wider potential discussion beyond this paper about divergent visions of impact involving academic and non-academic communities, and how marginalised groups (including prisoners) can be imbricated and impacted by academic impact agendas.

Secondly, I was able to engage with other disciplines such as criminology, law and psychology, building upon a wider knowledge-base and engaging with relevant audiences. And thirdly – the ‘holy grail’ of the REF – I had a research area where policy littered the data field. Perhaps I could produce findings that would actually be of use beyond academia, helping to gain some public attention for a discipline whose applied work has been under-advertised (Bennett and Wilson, 2003).

After starting my doctorate, I immediately embarked on the slow process of applying for permission to interview prisoners participating in rehabilitation schemes in various UK prisons. Well into my second year of study, after finally being considered by their research activity board, Her Majesty’s Prison Service declined my application on the basis that I was too inexperienced in dealing with prisoners as vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the output of my cultural approach was not considered useful enough for the prison system to warrant the time and resources that would be needed to produce it. Without specialist knowledge of the psychology of criminal(ised) individuals, or the vocational expertise provided by practitioners within the public domain, my ability to access the environment as simply a *geographer* was impossible. Research within the prison setting is welcomed, but gaining access is highly influenced by whether the output can be used to provide guidance for improving penal policy, in particular to decrease recidivism amongst decarcerated individuals. This reveals a distinct tension surrounding the definitions of impactful research between academic and non-academic institutions, such as the prison service.

The example of my own research illustrates some of the challenges for would-be academics such as the limitations of research in the ‘age of austerity’, the usefulness of cultural research, and the need for value-for-money products produced by experienced technicians of the subject area. This also provides an example of what McCormack (2004) describes as the mismatch between university conceptions of research and the experiences of postgraduate students. Having unexpected impediments to accessing the data field had significant potential to delay completion of the thesis, and encumber future career aspirations.

How should these challenges be addressed? At the end of the last decade, geographers called for an increase in the availability of research training for postgraduates (Gwanzura-Ottemoeller et al., 2005; Pearson and Brew, 2002). Certainly, these schemes were influenced by the pressure for universities to provide worthy transferable skills in exchange for government stipends. However, those within the higher education system were persuaded of the richness this may provide for the research project itself (Sidaway and Johnston, 2007). Unfortunately, this training often falls short in illustrating how doctoral students may generate impact in their work. Rachel Pain, writing in 2006 acknowledged that, “at present there is only a limited body of knowledge, no textbooks, no postgraduate training courses or workshops on how to approach and negotiate policy research” (Pain, 2006, 256).

More recently, there have been movements towards addressing this omission. Aside from REF expectations, *Academic Impact* is a program of the Outreach Division of the Department of Public Information of the UN (Academic Impact, 2009). It is open to all institutions of higher education, as well as bodies whose substantive responsibilities relate to the conduct of research. Based on ten principles, it encourages commitment to form partnerships between higher education and the promotion of human rights, citizenship, sustainability, and so on. For postgraduates, the collaboration between departments and outside entities is gradually becoming more commonplace, for example through CASE studentships (formerly known as ‘Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering’) in the UK (Demeritt and Lees, 2005). In Denmark, new models of postgraduate funding and training have developed PhDs that integrate industry-based approaches throughout the course, offering opportunities to deliver research outputs specific to a particular industrial sector (Kolmos et al., 2008). Similarly, scholarships such as Knowledge Economy Skills (KESS) and Access to Masters (ATM) in Wales support collaborative research projects with external partners based in the specific convergence areas in Wales. Importantly, these collaborations rest on both an intensive research skills programme and compulsory report elements where empirical findings are translated into useable documents for the external partner. Although these systems might be open to critique surrounding the way that they put constraints or agendas upon research outputs, in real terms, my KESS peers report a useful, if work-heavy PhD, training them acutely within their subject area.

In summary, it is often difficult for graduate students to conduct research that is, or is understood as, impactful in a social policy sense, because they are usually not well-situated institutionally to access areas of policy relevance. This is demonstrated by my experience of attempting to conduct research in prisons (a policy-relevant area) in the face of access constraints. However, in recognition of this, a number of training programs for graduate students have been developed to address this problem of conducting research with policy-impact – an encouraging trajectory for today’s ‘researchers-in-training’.

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